

E. F. BENSON



***THE COMPLETE
SHORT STORIES
OF E. F. BENSON***

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The Complete Short Stories of E. F. Benson

Enriched edition.

Introduction, Studies and Commentaries by Tyler Ashford

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Introduction

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This edition presents The Complete Short Stories of E. F. Benson, gathering across the volumes *Make Way for Lucia*, *Stories*, *The Room in the Tower*, and *Other Stories*, *The Countess of Lowndes Square*, and *Other Stories*, *Visible and Invisible*, *Spook Stories*, *More Spook Stories*, and *Uncollected Stories*. Its purpose is to offer in one place the full range of Benson's shorter fiction, from social comedy to the supernatural. The focus here is exclusively on short stories: no novels, plays, poems, essays, diaries, or letters are included. Readers will find both celebrated tales and lesser-known pieces that illuminate the breadth of his practice.

Within these pages the genres represented are various but unified by Benson's distinctive voice. The ghost story, a form with which his name is closely associated, stands alongside comedies of manners, light crime sketches, and society vignettes. The stories are concise works of fiction rather than chapters from longer narratives, and they demonstrate how Benson uses the short form's compression for irony, atmosphere, and surprise. The volumes preserve his movement between urbane drawing-room observation and episodes of mounting unease, revealing how the same keen eye for social detail can also register the unsettling dislocations of fear, obsession, and moral ambiguity.

In the explicitly supernatural collections—*The Room in the Tower* and *Other Stories*, *Visible and Invisible*, *Spook Stories*, and *More Spook Stories*—Benson cultivates dread through the ordinary. He often situates disturbance within familiar

settings, then allows a single breach of normality to widen into terror. Rational narrators weigh evidence, everyday objects darken with implication, and patterns recur with a logic that feels persuasive even when the cause remains unspoken. Rather than relying on mechanical shocks, he favors steady accumulation, a carefully paced approach that makes his tales memorable for atmosphere and for the way the uncanny seems to borrow the textures of daily life.

The Countess of Lowndes Square and Other Stories broadens the register beyond phantoms to expose the precarious theater of civility. Here Benson dissects gossip, petty cruelty, and social ambition with a sharpened comic sense, while allowing anxiety and ethical compromise to press at the margins. The result is fiction that is recognizably modern in its psychological emphasis. The stakes are sometimes criminal, sometimes purely reputational, but in every case he maps how a gesture, an invitation, or a silence can change a life. These stories affirm that his celebrated wit is inseparable from a steady interest in motive and consequence.

Make Way for Lucia Stories gathers short pieces connected with the world of Benson's celebrated society novels. The stories condense the rivalries, performances, and social inventions that animate his comic imagination, offering quick studies of status play and aesthetic pretension. Without requiring knowledge of the longer books, they capture the rhythms of conversation, the choreography of tea-table politics, and the ingenuity with which characters stage small victories. They demonstrate his economy in character drawing and timing, and they remind us that the same exactness that builds suspense in the ghost tales also underwrites the sparkle and precision of his social comedy.

The Uncollected Stories section preserves work that lay outside his principal volumes yet is integral to the record of his craft. These pieces range in tone and subject, extending the spectrum from urbane mischief to disquiet. Read together with the better-known cycles, they clarify Benson's recurring preoccupations: the masks of civility, the pleasures and perils of sociability, the intrusion of inexplicable forces, and the moral costs of self-deception. They also show his stylistic signatures at close range—clear architecture, crisp diction, calibrated irony—disclosing how consistently he trusted structure and observation over ornament, even when he allowed fancy, menace, or farce to flourish.

Taken as a whole, this single-author collection foregrounds the unity of an apparently divided oeuvre. Whether observing a drawing room or a haunted lane, Benson writes with alertness to pattern: how habits become ritual, and how ritual shelters both kindness and cruelty. His short stories endure because they are exact, entertaining, and precise about consequence. They continue to invite new readers to the English short-story tradition in two strong branches, the comic and the uncanny. By assembling his complete shorter fiction, this volume restores the balance of his reputation and illuminates the discipline that anchored his versatility.

Historical Context

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Edward Frederic Benson (1867–1940) wrote across the late Victorian, Edwardian, and interwar decades, and the dates of his short-story collections track these shifting worlds. *The Room in the Tower, and Other Stories* appeared in 1912; *The Countess of Lowndes Square, and Other Stories* in 1920; *Visible and Invisible* in 1923; *Spook Stories* in 1928; *More Spook Stories* in 1934; alongside comic *Make Way for Lucia* pieces and later uncollected tales. Born to Edward White Benson, Archbishop of Canterbury, and raised amid clerical and intellectual debate, he combined urbane satire with unease about the unseen, producing fiction attuned to both fashionable society and the era's speculative fascinations.

His supernatural mode arose within a robust British culture of spiritualism and psychical inquiry that had flourished since the 1860s and formalized with the Society for Psychical Research in 1882. Public séances, newspaper debates, and Christmas ghost-story traditions (popularized from Dickens to M. R. James, whose first collection appeared in 1904) created an expectant readership. Benson's early ghost tales share that milieu's interest in evidential testimony and restrained narration, favoring plausible witnesses and domestic spaces over medieval dungeons. This climate, apparent before 1914, framed *The Room in the Tower's* mix of nightmare logic and drawing-room realism, a combination he refined in later volumes.

The First World War (1914–1918) and the influenza pandemic of 1918–1920 left Britain steeped in loss, which increased the appeal of narratives broaching survival,

haunting, and memory. Arthur Conan Doyle's public advocacy of spiritualism from 1916 onward signaled the mainstreaming of such interests. Benson, publishing *The Countess of Lowndes Square* in 1920 and *Visible and Invisible* in 1923, wrote for readers negotiating bereavement and modernity. His elegant settings—Mayfair salons, seaside villas, quiet rectories—meet postwar anxieties through controlled disturbances, where apparitions register guilt, grief, or social displacement rather than mere shock. This psychological tact suited an audience seeking consolation as much as chills.

Benson's move to the Sussex Cinque Port of Rye, and his residence at Lamb House—formerly Henry James's home—beginning in 1919 gave him a concrete microcosm for social comedy. He served as mayor in the 1930s and observed the mechanics of local power: committees, fêtes, music clubs, and rival hostesses. These experiences, transmuted into the fictional Tilling of the *Make Way for Lucia* stories, align with interwar small-town Britain, where tourism, weekenders from London, and improved transport complicated entrenched hierarchies. The resulting satire of etiquette and ambition bears the impress of a real place shaped by coastal commerce, seasonal visitors, and the afterglow of Jamesian civility.

Broader interwar transformations sharpen the social textures across Benson's short fiction. The Representation of the People Act 1918 and the Equal Franchise Act 1928 expanded the electorate, while women's increased civic presence altered club life and local politics—central arenas in the *Lucia* tales. Consumer modernity arrived with telephones, motorcars, gramophones, and the BBC (founded 1922), furnishing props for status display and misunderstandings. Simultaneously, the prestige of old titles waned as professional and commercial fortunes rose, a

tension visible in both London set-pieces and provincial dramas. Benson's keen ear for fashion, speech, and ritual decodes how new conveniences amplified older patterns of rivalry.

The market for short fiction that sustained Benson was itself a historical formation. Late-Victorian and Edwardian periodicals, story papers, and Christmas numbers offered steady venues, while lending libraries and book clubs spread collections to middle-class parlors. The Strand Magazine and comparable outlets cultivated brevity, twist, and tone. Many pieces later gathered into *The Room in the Tower*, *Visible and Invisible*, *Spook Stories*, and *More Spook Stories* first appeared in such magazines, explaining their episodic symmetry and compact climaxes. Uncollected Stories reflect this ecology, surviving in scattered print. The serial rhythm shaped reception: readers met Benson's ghosts and socialites alongside detective puzzles and travel sketches.

As the interwar years advanced, scientific discourse reframed the supernatural. Electricity's ubiquity, X-rays (discovered 1895), radio, and psychoanalytic ideas about dreams and repression (popularized after 1900) provided alternate vocabularies for uncanny experience. Publicized cases such as Borley Rectory, reported from 1929 and investigated by Harry Price, kept hauntings in the headlines. Against this backdrop, *Spook Stories* (1928) and *More Spook Stories* (1934) stage conflicts between rational explanation and residual dread, often in modern houses with telephones and bright lamps. Benson's preference for suggestion over gore mirrors a culture negotiating between evidential skepticism and a lingering appetite for inexplicable visitations.

The 1930s overlaid domestic comedy and supernatural unease with fresh pressures: the Depression after 1929, political extremism including the British Union of Fascists (founded 1932), and the 1936 abdication crisis. These unsettlements intensified the appeal of Benson's Tilling escapades as tactful escapism and kept his ghost stories timely as parables of intrusion. *More Spook Stories* appeared in 1934 amid these currents. Benson died in 1940, early in the Second World War, after three decades shaping popular taste. Subsequent reprints and anthologies, tracing back to mid-century revivals of the English ghost-story tradition, helped secure the varied corpus now gathered as *The Complete Short Stories*.

Synopsis (Selection)

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Make Way for Lucia Stories

Sketches of provincial high society where formidable hostesses wage elegant wars over status, taste, and ceremony.

Benson's light, needling wit exposes vanity and social theater, offering a sparkling comic counterbalance to the eeriness of his ghost tales.

Early Ghost Stories: The Room in the Tower, and Other Stories; The Countess of Lowndes Square, and Other Stories

These early collections explore incursions of dread into well-appointed drawing rooms—haunted rooms, recurring nightmares, and fatal charms—alongside a few sinister human intrigues.

In a measured, confiding voice, Benson builds atmosphere from the ordinary, establishing motifs of oppressive houses, dream-omens, and rational minds beset by the inexplicable that echo through his later work.

Visible And Invisible

Pivoting toward psychical speculation, these stories test the line between thought and apparition, invoking telepathy, doubles, and quasi-scientific hauntings.

The tone grows cooler and more experimental, refining ambiguity and suggesting that terror may be as much mental imprint as external revenant.

Late Ghost Stories: Spook Stories; More Spook Stories

These later sequences distill Benson's method into crisp encounters with revenants and cursed locales, often erupting abruptly from polite, sunlit settings.

Recurring images—nocturnal footsteps, chill rooms, the fatal pull of obsession—are rendered with economical craft, signaling a shift toward tighter construction and sharper shocks.

Uncollected Stories

A varied assortment ranging from eerie miniatures to social satires and odd character pieces.

They highlight Benson's versatility while revisiting signatures—ironic civility, mounting unease, and the uncanny seeping into everyday life—in brief, often experimental forms.

The Complete Short Stories of E. F. Benson

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The Male Impersonator

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MISS ELIZABETH MAPP was sitting, on this warm September morning, in the little public garden at Tilling, busy as a bee with her watercolour sketch. She had taken immense pains with the drawing of the dykes that intersected the marsh, of the tidal river which ran across it from the coast, and of the shipyard in the foreground: indeed she had procured a photograph of this particular view and, by the judicious use of tracing-paper, had succeeded in seeing the difficult panorama precisely as the camera saw it: now the rewarding moment was come to use her paintbox. She was intending to be very bold over this, following the method which Mr Sargent practised with such satisfactory results, namely of painting, not what she knew was there, but what her eye beheld, and there was no doubt whatever that the broad waters of the high tide, though actually grey and muddy, appeared to be as blue as the sky which they reflected. So, with a fierce glow of courage she filled her broad brush with the same strong solution of cobalt as she had used for the sky, and unhesitatingly applied it.

"There!" she said to herself. "That's what he would have done. And now I must wait till it dries."

The anxiety of waiting to see the effect of so reckless a proceeding by no means paralysed the natural activity of Miss Mapp's mind, and there was plenty to occupy it. She had returned only yesterday afternoon from a month's holiday in Switzerland, and there was much to plan and look forward to. Already she had made a minute inspection of her house and garden, satisfying herself that the rooms had been kept well-aired, that no dusters or dish-cloths were missing, that there was a good crop of winter lettuces, and that all her gardener's implements were there except one

trowel, which she might possibly have overlooked: she did not therefore at present entertain any dark suspicions on the subject. She had also done her marketing in the High Street, where she had met several friends, of whom Godiva Plaistow was coming to tea to give her all the news, and thus, while the cobalt dried, she could project her mind into the future. The little circle of friends, who made life so pleasant and busy (and sometimes so agitating) an affair in Tilling would all have returned now for the winter, and the days would scurry by in a round of housekeeping, bridge, weekly visits to the workhouse, and intense curiosity as to anything of domestic interest which took place in the strenuous world of this little country town.

The thought of bridge caused a slight frown to gather on her forehead. Bridge was the chief intellectual pursuit of her circle and, shortly before she went away, that circle had been convulsed by the most acute divergences of opinion with regard to majority-calling. Miss Mapp had originally been strongly against it.

"I'm sure I don't know by what right the Portland Club tells us how to play bridge," she witheringly remarked. "Tilling might just as well tell the Portland Club to eat salt with gooseberry tart, and for my part I shall continue to play the game I prefer."

But then one evening Miss Mapp held no less than nine clubs in her hand and this profusion caused her to see certain advantages in majority-calling to which she had hitherto been blind, and she warmly espoused it. Unfortunately, of the eight players who spent so many exciting evenings together, there were thus left five who rejected majority (which was a very inconvenient number since one must always be sitting out) and three who preferred it. This was even more inconvenient, for they could not play bridge at all.

"We really must make a compromise," thought Miss Mapp, meaning that everybody must come round to her way

of thinking, "or our dear little cosy bridge evenings won't be possible."

The warm sun had now dried her solution of cobalt, and, holding her sketch at arm's length, she was astonished to observe how blue she had made the river, and wondered if she had seen it quite as brilliant as that. But the cowardly notion of toning it down a little was put out of her head by the sound of the church clock striking one, and it was time to go home to lunch.

The garden where she had been sketching was on the southward slope of the hill below the Church square, and having packed her artistic implements she climbed the steep little rise. As she skirted along one side of this square, which led into Curfew Street, she saw a large pantechicon van lumbering along its cobbled way. It instantly occurred to her that the house at the far end of the street, which had stood empty so long, had been taken at last, and since this was one of the best residences in Tilling, it was naturally a matter of urgent importance to ascertain if this surmise was true. Sure enough the van stopped at the door, and Miss Mapp noticed that the bills in the windows of "Suntrap" which announced that it was for sale, had been taken down. That was extremely interesting, and she wondered why Diva Plaistow, who, in the brief interview they had held in the High Street this morning, had been in spate with a torrent of miscellaneous gossip, had not mentioned a fact of such primary importance. Could it be that dear Diva was unaware of it? It was pleasant to think that after a few hours in Tilling she knew more local news than poor Diva who had been here all August.

She retraced her steps and hurried home. Just as she opened the door she heard the telephone bell ringing, and was met by the exciting intelligence that this was a trunk call. Trunk calls were always thrilling; no one trunked over trivialities. She applied ear and mouth to the proper places.

"Tilling 76?" asked a distant insect-like voice.

Now, Miss Mapp's real number was Tilling 67, but she had a marvellous memory, and it instantly flashed through her mind that the number of Suntrap was 76. The next process was merely automatic, and she said, "Yes." If a trunk call was coming for Suntrap and a pantechnicon van had arrived at Suntrap, there was no question of choice: the necessity of hearing what was destined for Suntrap knew no law.

"Her ladyship will come down by motor this afternoon," said the insect, "and she —"

"Who will come down?" asked Miss Mapp, with her mouth watering.

"Lady Deal, I tell you. Has the first van arrived?"

"Yes," said Miss Mapp.

"Very well. Fix up a room for her ladyship. She'll get her food at some hotel, but she'll stop for a night or two settling in. How are you getting on, Susie?"

Miss Mapp did not feel equal to saying how Susie was getting on, and she slid the receiver quietly into its place.

She sat for a moment considering the immensity of her trove, feeling perfectly certain that Diva knew nothing about it all, or the fact that Lady Deal had taken Suntrap must have been her very first item of news. Then she reflected that a trunk call had been expended on Susie, and that she could do no less than pass the message on. A less scrupulous woman might have let Susie languish in ignorance, but her fine nature dictated the more honourable course. So she rang up Tilling 76, and in a hollow voice passed on the news. Susie asked if it was Jane speaking, and Miss Mapp again felt she did not know enough about Jane to continue the conversation.

"It's only at Tilling that such interesting things happen," she thought as she munched her winter lettuce . . . She had enjoyed her holiday at the Riffel Alp, and had had long talks to a Bishop about the revised prayer book, and to a Russian exile about Bolshevism and to a member of the Alpine Club about Mount Everest, but these remote cosmic subjects

really mattered far less than the tenant of Suntrap, for the new prayer book was only optional, and Russia and Mount Everest were very far away and had no bearing on daily life, as she had not the smallest intention of exploring either of them. But she had a consuming desire to know who Susie was, and since it would be a pleasant little stroll after lunch to go down Curfew Street, and admire the wide view at the end of it, she soon set out again. The pantechicon van was in process of unlading, and as she lingered a big bustling woman came to the door of Suntrap, and told the men where to put the piano. It was a slight disappointment to see that it was only an upright: Miss Mapp would have preferred a concert-grand for so territorially-sounding a mistress. When the piano had bumped its way into the rather narrow entrance, she put on her most winning smile, and stepped up to Susie with a calling-card in her hand, of which she had turned down the right-hand corner to show by this mystic convention that she had delivered it in person.

"Has her ladyship arrived yet?" she asked. "No? Then would you kindly give her my card when she gets here? *Thank you!*"

Miss Mapp had a passion for indirect procedure: it was so much more amusing, when in pursuit of any object, however trivial and innocent, to advance with stealth under cover rather than march up to it in the open and grab it, and impersonating Susie and Jane, though only for a moment at the end of a wire, supplied that particular sauce which rendered her life at Tilling so justly palatable. But she concealed her stalkings under the brushwood, so to speak, of a frank and open demeanour, and though she was sure she had a noble quarry within shot, did not propose to disclose herself just yet. Probably Lady Deal would return her card next day, and in the interval she would be able to look her up in the Peerage, of which she knew she had somewhere an antique and venerable copy, and she would thus be in a position to deluge Diva with a flood of

information: she might even have ascertained Lady Deal's views on majority-calling at bridge. She made a search for this volume, but without success, in the bookshelves of her big garden-room, which had been the scene of so much of Tilling's social life, and of which the bow-window, looking both towards the church and down the cobbled way which ran down to the High Street, was so admirable a post for observing the activities of the town. But she knew this book was somewhere in the house, and she could find it at leisure when she had finished picking Diva's brains of all the little trifles and shreds of news which had happened in Tilling during her holiday.

Though it was still only four o'clock, Miss Mapp gazing attentively out of her window suddenly observed Diva's round squat little figure trundling down the street from the church in the direction of her house, with those short twinkling steps of hers which so much resembled those of a thrush scudding over the lawn in search of worms. She hopped briskly into Miss Mapp's door, and presently scuttled into the garden-room, and began to speak before the door was more than ajar.

"I know I'm very early, Elizabeth," she said, "but I felt I must tell you what has happened without losing a moment. I was going up Curfew Street just now, and what do you think! Guess!"

Elizabeth gave a half-yawn and dexterously transformed it into an indulgent little laugh.

"I suppose you mean that the new tenant is settling into Suntrap," she said.

Diva's face fell: all the joy of the herald of great news died out of it.

"What? You know?" she said.

"Oh, dear me, yes," replied Elizabeth. "But thank you, Diva, for coming to tell me. That was a kind intention."

This was rather irritating: it savoured of condescension.

"Perhaps you know who the tenant is," said Diva with an unmistakable ring of sarcasm in her voice.

Miss Mapp gave up the idea of any further secrecy, for she could never find a better opportunity for making Diva's sarcasm look silly.

"Oh yes, it's Lady Deal," she said. "She is coming down — let me see, Thursday isn't it? — she is coming down today."

"But how did you know?" asked Diva.

Miss Mapp put a meditative finger to her forehead. She did not mean to lie, but she certainly did not mean to tell the truth.

"Now, who was it who told me?" she said. "Was it someone at the Riffel Alp? No, I don't think so. Someone in London, perhaps: yes, I feel sure that was it. But that doesn't matter: it's Lady Deal anyhow who has taken the house. In fact, I was just glancing round to see if I could find a Peerage: it might be useful just to ascertain who she was. But here's tea. Now it's your turn, dear: you shall tell me all the news of Tilling, and then we'll see about Lady Deal."

After this great piece of intelligence, all that poor Diva had to impart of course fell very flat: the forthcoming harvest festival, the mistake (if it was a mistake) that Mrs Poppit had made in travelling first-class with a third-class ticket, the double revoke made by Miss Terling at bridge, were all very small beer compared to this noble vintage, and presently the two ladies were engaged in a systematic search for the Peerage. It was found eventually in a cupboard in the spare bedroom, and Miss Mapp eagerly turned up "Deal".

"Viscount," she said. "Born, succeeded and so on. Ah, married —"

She gave a cry of dismay and disgust.

"Oh, how shocking!" she said. "Lady Deal was Helena Herman. I remember seeing her at a music hall."

"No!" said Diva.

"Yes," said Miss Mapp firmly. "And she was a male impersonator. That's the end of her; naturally we can have nothing to do with her, and I think everybody ought to know at once. To think that a male impersonator should come to Tilling and take one of the best houses in the place! Why, it might as well have remained empty."

"Awful!" said Diva. "But what an escape I've had, Elizabeth. I very nearly left my card at Suntrap, and then I should have had this dreadful woman calling on me. What a mercy I didn't."

Miss Mapp found bitter food for thought in this, but that had to be consumed in private, for it would be too humiliating to tell Diva that she had been caught in the trap which Diva had avoided. Diva must not know that, and when she had gone Miss Mapp would see about getting out.

At present Diva showed no sign of going.

"How odd that your informant in London didn't tell you what sort of a woman Lady Deal was," she said, "and how lucky we've found her out in time. I am going to the choir practice this evening, and I shall be able to tell several people. All the same, Elizabeth, it would be thrilling to know a male impersonator, and she may be a very decent woman."

"Then you can go and leave your card, dear," said Miss Mapp, "and I should think you would know her at once."

"Well, I suppose it wouldn't do," said Diva regretfully. As Elizabeth had often observed with pain, she had a touch of Bohemianism about her.

Though Diva prattled endlessly on, it was never necessary to attend closely to what she was saying, and long before she left Miss Mapp had quite made up her mind as to what to do about that card. She only waited to see Diva twinkle safely down the street and then set off in the opposite direction for Suntrap. She explained to Susie with many apologies that she had left a card here by mistake, intending to bestow it next door, and thus triumphantly

recovered it. That she had directed that the card should be given to Lady Deal was one of those trumpery little inconsistencies which never troubled her.

The news of the titled male impersonator spread like influenza through Tilling, and though many ladies secretly thirsted to know her, public opinion felt that such moral proletarianism was impossible. Classes, it was true, in these democratic days were being sadly levelled, but there was a great gulf between male impersonators and select society which even viscountesses could not bridge. So the ladies of Tilling looked eagerly but furtively at any likely stranger they met in their shoppings, but their eyes assumed a glazed expression when they got close. Curfew Street, however, became a very favourite route for strolls before lunch when shopping was over, for the terrace at the end of it not only commanded a lovely view of the marsh but also of Suntrap. Miss Mapp, indeed, abandoned her Sargentesque sketch of the river, and began a new one here. But for a couple of days there were no great developments in the matter of the male impersonator.

Then one morning the wheels of fate began to whizz. Miss Mapp saw emerging from the door of Suntrap a bath-chair, and presently, heavily leaning on two sticks, there came out an elderly lady who got into it, and was propelled up Curfew Street by Miss Mapp's part-time gardener. Curiosity was a quality she abhorred, and with a strong effort but a trembling hand she went on with her sketch without following the bath-chair, or even getting a decent view of its occupant. But in ten minutes she found it was quite hopeless to pursue her artistic efforts when so overwhelming a human interest beckoned, and, bundling her painting materials into her satchel, she hurried down towards the High Street, where the bath-chair had presumably gone. But before she reached it, she met Diva scudding up towards her house. As soon as they got within

speaking distance they broke into telegraphic phrases, being both rather out of breath.

"Bath-chair came out of Suntrap," began Miss Mapp.

"Thought so," panted Diva. "Saw it through the open door yesterday."

"Went down towards the High Street," said Miss Mapp.

"I passed it twice," said Diva proudly.

"What's she like?" asked Miss Mapp. "Only got a glimpse."

"Quite old," said Diva. "Should think between fifty and sixty. How long ago did you see her at the music hall?"

"Ten years. But she seemed quite young then . . . Come into the garden-room, Diva. We shall see in both directions from there, and we can talk quietly."

The two ladies hurried into the bow-window of the garden-room, and having now recovered their breath went on less spasmodically.

"That's very puzzling you know," said Miss Mapp. "I'm sure it wasn't more than ten years ago, and, as I say, she seemed quite young. But of course make-up can do a great deal, and also I should think impersonation was a very ageing life. Ten years of it might easily have made her an old woman."

"But hardly as old as this," said Diva. "And she's quite lame: two sticks, and even then great difficulty in walking. Was she lame when you saw her on the stage?"

"I can't remember that," said Miss Mapp. "Indeed, she couldn't have been lame, for she was Romeo, and swarmed up to a high balcony. What was her face like?"

"Kind and nice," said Diva, "but much wrinkled and a good deal of moustache."

Miss Mapp laughed in a rather unkind manner.

"That would make the male impersonation easier," she said. "Go on, Diva, what else?"

"She stopped at the grocer's, and Cannick came hurrying out in the most sycophantic manner. And she ordered

belief in the supernatural is not asserted but staged as an experience of attention, its credibility depending on how closely one follows a mind at work.

The Countess of Lowndes Square expands the toolkit. Benson experiments with nested recollections, hearsay, and documents summarized within the narrative flow. Authority becomes distributed across multiple voices, none quite sufficient alone. This structure invites readers to assemble likelihoods rather than receive verdicts, calibrating skepticism as a social art. The technique respects experience while bracketing certainty, mirroring a world newly sensitive to miscommunication and rumor. Even when the uncanny recedes, the method of composite testimony keeps interpretive doors ajar, making plausibility a negotiated outcome rather than a fixed property of events.

In Visible and Invisible and the late Spook volumes, narrators often adopt a calm procedural tone—recording times, experiments, and corroborating details—only to leave key links unobservable. Benson occasionally slips into quiet omniscience for social comedies, but in the ghostly mode he prefers the disciplined witness who cannot finally prove. The effect is cumulative: skepticism is honored, yet ambiguity persists as an ethical stance, protecting subjects from sensationalism while acknowledging what exceeds report. Uncollected Stories sometimes frame events as notes or press summaries, further testing how public narration thins or thickens belief.

Question 4

What do Benson's chosen settings reveal about changing class, domesticity, and historical pressures?

The Lucia stories build villages into living diagrams of class and taste. Houses, gardens, and civic venues become instruments of self-fashioning, with architectural choices signaling cultural authority. Benson maps pathways of visitation—who calls, who hosts, who presides—as routes through status terrain. Domestic interiors absorb rivalries without violence, yet the spatial choreography feels tactical. The setting’s stability, with its recurring sites and rituals, underwrites the comedy while registering deeper anxieties about access and control. Space is both prize and argument, where possession of rooms mirrors possession of narrative attention.

In *The Room in the Tower*, settings are mobile: country houses, lakeside pensions, Italian retreats. Travel and hospitality promise ease while exposing visitors to unfamiliar arrangements of privacy and power. Architectural features—towers, annexes, corridors—mark thresholds where ordinary comfort thins. The prewar ambiance is cosmopolitan, but the stories notice how inherited estates and temporary lodgings alike store emotional residue. Benson links scenic pleasure to vulnerability, suggesting that beauty and tradition can shelter what observational habits fail to catch. The result is neither indictment nor celebration, but a steady reading of place as temperament.

From *The Countess of Lowndes Square* through *Visible and Invisible*, *Spook Stories*, and *More Spook Stories*, urban flats, garden suburbs, clubs, and seaside hotels reflect interwar modernity’s mixed signals. Interiors shrink, privacy increases, and anonymity grows; corridors give way to lifts and lobbies, compressing encounters. Benson exploits these designs to stage collisions between decorum and intrusion, while coastal and estuarial landscapes introduce transitional moods. *Uncollected Stories* add occasional colonial or Continental backdrops, attentive yet restrained. Across

these environments, historical pressures register indirectly: social codes loosen, but the need for careful self-presentation intensifies within more porous habitats.

Memorable Quotes

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[1q](#) "The spirit of Linkworth was there."

[2q](#) "'I am one with it," he said to himself, "the river and I, I and the river."

[3q](#) "Luck still smiled on him, for the night was foggy,"

[4q](#) "She had also become a smooth conversational liar."

[5q](#) "Mind is no more than the servant who comes to the door,"

[6q](#) "It seemed as if the whole world had been suddenly transferred into the heart of an opal,"

[7q](#) "Children with hoops and scooters are phenomena rarely encountered in the Terrace and dogs are equally uncommon."

[8q](#) "a sort of sickness of the soul"

[9q](#) "All day I had felt that drowsiness which accompanies snowfall,"

[10q](#) "Houses starve, you know, if they are not lived in."

[11q](#) "spells and sorceries could survive, grew silent on his lips."

[12q](#) ""misty and perilous places""